



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Read:

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/annual-data-insights-report-2025/>

Read:

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/on-demand-premium-access-to-children-s-suffering-as-gangs-reap-profits-from-online-sexual-exploitation/>

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) Annual data and insights 2025 **What schools need to know**

The latest findings from the Internet Watch Foundation highlight a rapidly evolving and increasingly complex online safeguarding landscape. The 2025 report delivers a clear message: **online child sexual abuse is growing in scale, sophistication and accessibility and schools remain a critical line of defence.**

The scale is still rising

The volume of online child sexual abuse material identified and removed continues to increase year on year, with 2025 marking another record. The number of reports containing criminal imagery is now at its highest level, with new content appearing at an alarming frequency.

What this means for schools:

This is no longer a peripheral safeguarding issue. The scale and pace of harm reinforce the need for:

- Ongoing staff vigilance
- Robust safeguarding systems
- Clear and well-understood reporting pathways

“Self-generated” content remains the dominant risk

A significant proportion of imagery now involves self-generated content, where children are coerced, manipulated or pressured into sharing images of themselves. The majority of identified victims are girls, typically in their early to mid-teens.

What this means for schools:

This links closely to:

- Sextortion
- Grooming
- Peer pressure and coercion

Schools should prioritise:

- Age-appropriate relationships and online safety education
- Clear teaching around consent and image sharing
- Safe, trusted reporting routes for pupils

Artificial intelligence is accelerating risk

The report highlights the growing role of AI in creating abuse imagery. This includes both fully AI-generated content and manipulated images of real children. The speed and accessibility of these tools significantly increases risk.

What this means for schools:

- Children may be victims without having shared images themselves
- Fake or altered images can still cause significant harm

Schools should:

- Update online safety and RSHE curriculum to include AI risks
- Ensure staff are aware of emerging technologies
- Reinforce that all image-based abuse must be treated seriously

Global reach - but uneven protection

While reporting systems now reach billions of users globally, awareness and understanding of how to report concerns remains inconsistent. Many children still do not recognise abuse or know how to seek help.

What this means for schools:

Children need to:

- Understand what unsafe online behaviour looks like
- Know how and where to report concerns
- Feel confident that adults will listen and act

Increasing vulnerability among teenagers

The data shows rising concerns particularly among 14-17-year-olds, with more cases involving coercion, manipulation and exploitation rather than traditional grooming models.

What this means for schools:

Safeguarding approaches must extend beyond basic online safety messaging and address:

- Peer dynamics
- Online relationships
- Reputation, pressure and risk-taking behaviours

Key safeguarding actions for schools

- **Strengthen staff training:** Ensure training reflects current risks, including AI, sextortion and self-generated imagery. Staff should be confident in recognising concerns and acting promptly.
- **Prioritise pupil education and voice:** Online safety should be regularly revisited, using realistic scenarios to support understanding and encourage disclosure.
- **Review filtering, monitoring and reporting systems:** Ensure systems are effective, regularly reviewed and aligned with statutory expectations.
- **Promote a culture of ‘it could happen here’:** Encourage openness and reduce stigma around reporting. Pupils should feel safe to speak up.
- **Engage parents and carers:** Share emerging risks and support consistent messaging between home and school.

Police powers and children: strip searching and use of force **What schools need to know**

The latest report from the Children’s Commissioner for England provides a stark and important insight into how police powers are being used with children, particularly in relation to strip searching and the use of force. The findings raise significant safeguarding concerns that schools must be aware of, particularly given that some incidents have taken place in or around school settings.

Strip searching of children remains a serious safeguarding concern

The report highlights that strip searching is an intrusive and potentially traumatic experience and should only ever be used as a last resort where there is an immediate risk of serious harm. Despite some reduction in overall numbers since 2020, the Commissioner concludes that:

- Too many searches are still unnecessary or poorly justified
- Safeguarding procedures are not always followed consistently
- Some children are subjected to repeat strip searches, raising concerns about missed opportunities for early intervention

What this means for schools:

- Schools must recognise that this is a child protection issue, not simply a policing matter
- Any incident involving police searches of pupils should trigger safeguarding reflection and oversight
- DSLs should consider whether wider vulnerabilities or exploitation risks are present

A high proportion of cases do not lead to further action

The data shows that in many cases, strip searches or use of force do not result in any further action by the police.

This raises important questions about:

- Proportionality
- Decision-making
- Whether safeguarding needs are being prioritised

What this means for schools:

- Pupils may experience significant trauma without any substantiated outcome
- Schools should ensure appropriate pastoral and emotional support is in place following any incident
- There should be clear recording, reflection and, where appropriate, challenge

Use of force on children is more common than expected

The report identifies that force is used in a significant proportion of police interactions with children, including tactics such as handcuffs and other restraint methods.

Importantly:

- Force was used in around 1 in 5 stop and searches involving children
- In many of these cases, there was no further action taken

What this means for schools:

- The use of force should always be considered through a safeguarding and trauma-informed lens
- Schools may need to support pupils following police involvement, particularly where restraint or force has been used
- Records should clearly capture the child’s experience and voice, not just the incident

Significant racial disparities

The report identifies persistent and concerning disproportionality:

- Black children are significantly more likely to be strip searched
- They are also more likely to have force used against them

There are also concerns about adultification, where children are perceived and treated as older or more threatening than they are.

What this means for schools:

- Schools should reflect on their own practice in relation to bias, disproportionality and inclusion
- Safeguarding responses should actively consider equality and lived experience
- There should be a clear understanding of how trust in adults and systems may be affected for some pupils

Although these incidents involve police powers, the report makes it clear that schools are key safeguarding partners. The case of “Child Q”, where a strip search took place in a school setting, continues to highlight the importance of:

- Professional curiosity
- Clear protocols
- Strong safeguarding leadership

Read more:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/police-powers-and-children-strip-searching-and-use-of-force/>

Summer term 1 - 5-minute ‘bitesize’ and audio version safeguarding refresher videos

Homelessness - Tuesday 5th May

Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 12th May

Identifying young carers in school - Tuesday 19th May

NEW Weekly newsletters - I’ve added our weekly newsletters from the academic year starting September 2025 to the CPD area, so you can easily revisit and reference any earlier content as needed.

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